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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 000151

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KJUS](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: CONFLICTING ACCOUNTS OF NN BODIES, BUT NO MASS GRAVE

CLASSIFIED BY: Brian Nichols, Deputy Chief of Mission; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Spanish and American press published stories January 28 and 29 announcing the discovery of a mass grave in the township of Macarena, Meta which reportedly contained 2,000 unidentified victims of forced disappearance by the Colombian military since ¶2005. We have not discovered any information that would corroborate the assertions in the international press. United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Deputy Director told us his organization has no data to suggest an increase in disappeared persons. The Prosecutor General's (Fiscalia) Justice and Peace Law Unit Director told us the Corps of Technical Investigators' (CTI) initial report on the gravesite in March 2009 estimated 1,400 unidentified (NN) bodies were buried in the town's official cemetery. The cemetery caretaker responsible for autopsies and burials of NN bodies confirmed they were military combat kills, but dismissed claims of forced disappearance or "false positive" murders. Poloff visited the cemetery on February 2; Post will continue to monitor the situation. End Summary.

INTERNATIONAL PRESS AND NGOS: GRAVESITE SERVES AS
MILITARY DUMPING GROUND FOR FORCIBLY DISAPPEARED

¶2. (U) On January 28, Spanish newspaper Diaro Publico published an article claiming that a visiting delegation of British parliamentarians had discovered a mass grave in La Macarena, Meta that contained 2,000 victims of forced disappearance by the military since 2005. Miami's El Nuevo Herald repeated the story on January 29, but local press has not widely reported it. While the articles quoted several human rights activists alleging the dead were victims of military forced disappearances, only one provided supporting data -- the Human Rights Committee of the Eastern Region of Bajo Ariari said the cemetery could contain the remains of 63

victims of forced disappearance by unknown armed actors.

13. (C) Javier Hernandez, UNHCHR Deputy Director, said his organization has no evidence to suggest that forced disappearances by the military are on the rise. Forced disappearances by all actors fell by 19 percent, according to the Disappeared Persons Registry (SIRDEC), from 414 in 2008 to 348 in 2009.

MILITARY INVESTIGATING, LOCAL PRESS NOT REPORTING

14. (C) On February 2, Chief of Defense Freddy Padilla told Polcouns that he had ordered an investigation into the status of the cemetery. He asserted that interest had been stirred up by one foreign NGO and a foreign reporter. He said that at least one Colombian media outlet, CM&, had looked at the story but told him that the assertions in the international press appeared to be fabricated. He pointed out that Ambassador Brownfield had visited La Macarena that morning and received no questions about the cemetery from the accompanying Colombian press. Padilla assured Polcouns, however, that he understood the sensitivities to this issue in Washington and would continue to investigate.

CARETAKER: ALL UNIDENTIFIED DEAD KILLED BY MILITARY,

DISCOUNTS FORCED DISAPPEARANCE AND "FALSE POSITIVE" MURDERS

15. (C) On February 2, Poloff visited La Macarena's official burial ground, Our Lady of Macarena Cemetery, with General Rodriguez Clavijo, Director of the Army's Human Rights Directorate. The graveyard contains the remains of approximately 700 town residents and an unknown number of NN military combat kills. The Rapid Deployment Force (FUDRA) military base, situated on the peak of a hill with a 360-degree view of the region, borders the cemetery at the base of the hill. Rodriguez reported that the base was established in 2004 -- after the creation of the cemetery.

16. (SBU) The cemetery's caretaker, Humberto Hernandez, has worked for National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Science (Medicina Legal) for nine years. Hernandez reported that he had buried the NN bodies in the cemetery and all were placed in individual graves. He emphasized that the cemetery's NN bodies were killed by the military -- none were victims of illegal armed groups.

17. (SBU) Hernandez rejected the allegation that the NN could have been victims of "false positive" killings -- military murders of civilians falsely reported as combat kills. Specifically, he commented that bullet holes in the clothing were consistent with the wounds. The clothing, he added, had fit and was the type generally worn by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) uniforms; and, as was standard for FARC combatants slain in combat, the undergarments were embroidered with NN and the individual's alias. Hernandez was equally dismissive of the likelihood of forced disappearances, since he said only two residents of La Macarena had disappeared in the past year, and they had been taken by the FARC.

2002-2004 RETAKING FARC-LANDIA: FEW RECORDS ON COMBAT DEAD

¶8. (SBU) Hernandez divided his nine years working in the cemetery into three periods: the demilitarized zone (despeje); military inroads into the region, from January 2002 through March 2004; and the return of civilian institutions, from March 2004 to the present. He began to bury NN bodies in the second period, as the military began to retake FARC-controlled territory. Those bodies received no autopsies, and were buried in unmarked, individual graves. Hernandez showed Poloff the location of NN bodies buried during that period; he stated he had buried 835, a number he recalled from memory, though he suggested hospital records could confirm the exact number.

MARCH 2004: STATE INSTITUTIONS RETURN, DOCUMENT COMBAT DEAD

¶9. (C) Hernandez described how the return of civilian institutions beginning in March 2004 (coincident with the deployment of Joint Task Force Omega to the region) had altered processing procedures

for NN combat kills. All bodies were autopsied, photographed, fingerprinted, and buried in a separate section of the cemetery in graves clearly marked with the CTI file number. Hernandez told Poloff he conducted autopsies in the presence of a doctor from the hospital. Alvaro Balcazar, civilian coordinator of the Macarena Regional Coordination Center, confirmed the CTI records include when and where the deaths occurred. Hernandez said some of the registered NN bodies had been reclaimed by family members; all had acknowledged that their relatives had been FARC members.

¶10. (C) Hernandez could not estimate the number of NN bodies buried since March 2004. According to Joint Task Force Omega Commander General Javier Florez, the cemetery contains 344 registered NN bodies. Florez indicated that the military had initiated an effort to identify the registered NN by checking the post-mortem fingerprints against the national identification (cedula) database; thus far 60 individuals had been identified. According to the Prosecutor General's Justice and Peace Law Unit Director Luis Gonzalez Leon, the initial March 2009 CTI report estimated about 1,400 NN graves in the cemetery. The Prosecutor General's Office has not initiated exhumations, although it may do so if it obtains credible evidence of malfeasance.

UNHCHR: FARC DO NOT CARRY ID

¶11. (C) UNHCHR Deputy Director Hernandez told us Macarena medical doctors and church leaders had substantiated high numbers of NN combat dead in the region. Hernandez indicated that the Macarena hospital, which frequently conducted autopsies of combat kills, processes as many as five NN combat kills weekly. FARC relatives interviewed by UNHCHR corroborated the likelihood that fallen FARC combatants would be classified NN since they are not permitted to carry identification. Still, Hernandez emphasized that the military in Meta department historically had a high rate of "false positive" murders.

MACARENA REGION CENTRAL TO NATIONAL STRATEGY

¶12. (SBU) Fighting in the strategically placed Macarena has been as hot as anywhere in Colombia during Uribe's tenure. The Macarena region of Meta, just a few hours overland from Bogota, consists of six municipalities (counties) that were long a stronghold of the FARC. In 2002, the GOC initiated a major push to drive the FARC from Bogota, which necessitated some combat in Meta. In 2004, the Colombian Army initiated a thrust into Macarena under Plan Patriota, President Uribe's strategy to wrest control of rural areas from the FARC. Finally, in 2007, the GOC initiated the Plan for the Integrated Consolidation of Macarena (PCIM) to consolidate security gains under Plan Colombia through the establishment of state presence and democratic institutions.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The Colombian Army has been fighting the FARC for years in this area. It would stand to reason that slain FARC fighters would

be buried somewhere near the Army base. Since 2004, at least, those burials appear to have been documented by civilian authorities. Prior to that, when remains were not documented, we are less certain about the circumstances of combat deaths. At this time, however, we have not discovered any information that would corroborate the assertions in the international press. Of course, we will continue following the investigation and report on any relevant developments.

BROWNFIELD